



*RAAF C-47 A65-104 which as described by Group Captain Hitchins “finished up in the front garden” of his house at the RAAF base after being tied down in a hangar. The aircraft was written off. (South Australian Aviation Museum)*

As noted in Chapter 2, the actual RAAF commander, Group Captain D Hitchins, had been on leave 130 miles away on 24 December. Hitchins later recalled being picked up “late in the morning” at Smith Point by the C-47 that had initially been flown down to Tindall. He had listened to as much as he could of Darwin proceedings on a local ranger’s radio, without being able to make much sense of it. He recalled:

... the whole place was just like one vast rubbish dump. There were shattered buildings all over the place. I flew over our own house and had a good look at the lounge room floor through the ceiling because it was all collapsed. It was just one great big mess of littered foliage, collapsed trees and components of buildings that had blown about all over the place like pieces of confetti. That’s about all you can say. I don’t think there was one building in Darwin that was undamaged.

Hitchins described the damage to aircraft:

A civil DC-3 parked near one of them went straight across the top of the hangar. That would have to be 30 feet high, and the aeroplane went straight across the top of the hangar and finished up on its back ... and one of our DC-3’s, tied down in a hangar not far from my house, finished up in the front garden. A helicopter was flattened in that hangar when it collapsed. The small civil tarmac [had] 25/30 light to medium sized commercial aeroplanes were wrecked there, tangled up.

“Down south” at 0900 on Christmas Day the RAAF ordered a C-130 of No. 36 Squadron to be on standby, and 30 minutes later another, this time of No. 37 Squadron. A BAC 111 of No. 34 Squadron would carry Dr Rex Patterson, the Minister for the Northern Territory, to Darwin and – it was soon decided – Major General Stretton. This aircraft had left Fairbairn at 1530 also carrying “three surgeons, an anaesthetist, a registrar and three nursing sisters, as well as medical supplies.”